

Point Austin: A Question of Vision

Austin's possible futures are prefigured in two very different sorts of public action

BY MICHAEL KING

By sticking his foot firmly in his mouth – and following it with his wallet – mayoral aide Matt Curtis has given the anti-toll activists at Austin Toll Party yet another handy weapon in their determination to turn the Central Texas transportation fight into a symbolic battle of sublimely virtuous grassroots citizens against the woefully self-interested and corrupted powers-that-be. Despite a moment of singular foolishness – however provoked – Curtis had no business engaging in a silly sidewalk argument with a recall petition-gatherer, and even worse laying a "bet" against the campaigner's information on the toll road plan. (See "Mayor's Aide Makes Bad Bet on Toll Roads," p.32.) My own bet is we've all been there, once or twice, in an embarrassing public venue, and the once-bitten Matt Curtis may never speak to a person sitting at a table again.

That said, it wasn't enough, of course, for the Toll Party's Sal Costello and Linda Curtis (no relation, at all) to mock Matt Curtis' mistake, or to complain that he was interfering with their God-given rights to petition their representatives, to redress their grievances, to throw the bums out, etc., etc., etc. No, Sal and Linda had to accuse a city staff member of "bribery," blacken his name, call in the DA and demand a criminal investigation, and otherwise occupy public officials with pompously inflated nonsense that the actual subject of the "bribe" had already dismissed with a mature, resigned shrug. Unfortunately, this is standard practice with the anti-toll campaign – according to Costello et al. (just visit their Web site), no public official associated with the abhorred toll plan voted for it because he or she believes, on balance, that it's good public policy. No, they're all in league with the devil, profiteering on the side, conspiring with secret forces of evil, had personal financial problems of their own in the past (horrors!), or even, by golly, driven drunk.

So, like the Great Bribery Investigation, we have the similar spectacle of a forced conflict-of-interest investigation, almost certainly frivolous, over land owned by toll authority officials near where toll roads will run. Godspeed to the investigators. The problem for anti-tollsters, however, is that the value of land near a freeway will rise every bit as much as the value of land near a tollway – perhaps more. Would that mean those who own land but voted for the tolls were in fact voting against their own private interests? More pointedly, could it mean that those opposing the tolls must be doing so only out of crass political or financial self-interest, because they want the sainted "taxpayers" to pay for living

and commuting expenses that should rightfully be only their own?
Just a thought.

A Different Neighborhood

I happen to be mostly agnostic about the tolls – although if killing them will in fact ultimately mean less TxDOT swag available for Perry's Folly, aka the Trans-Texas Corridor, for God's sake let's put them out of our misery. And I believe that the mad rush to service already ill-considered urban sprawl, in fragile and semiarid ecosystems, with ever greater and more futile stretches of concrete (tolled or "free"), amounts to the public exercise of a community death wish. But the notion that every public official (and their staff) is only making obviously difficult decisions out of corrupt private motivations, and that if they publicly disagree with the currently prevailing winds blowing on a matter of policy they should be immediately recalled out of office (at large public expense), is little better politics than that of a lynch mob. If that makes me a Toll Party Pooper, so be it.

Contrast the ATP's sort of demagoguery with the initial work of the new Austin Transit Communities Coalition, a broad umbrella group of housing advocates ranging from the Austin Tenants Council through specific neighborhood groups to the Gray Panthers and Liveable City. The ATCC spent weeks developing a consensus of how best to incorporate the community's growing need for affordable housing into the city's ambitious plans for commuter rail and transit-oriented development. Then last week, they spent several patient hours testifying to the council about the limitations of the current staff draft of the TOD ordinance, and about how the citywide need for affordable housing will not be adequately served (they believe) by simple official exhortation. Rather, they insist, a healthy percentage of affordable housing must be a mandate in the TOD plans (as it is in the adopted plan for Mueller redevelopment), and that any such specific plans must grow up from the individual neighborhoods and not be imposed either by private real estate priorities or those of city planners.

These are modest goals, and there were several contrasting voices raised at the public hearing in defense of incentives over mandates – and in truth, any affordable housing plan must be structured to deliver sufficient profit to builders to make it feasible at all. In the short term, all that came directly out of the hearing is more of the same – another month of public discussion leading to the first stage of a TOD process that will take several years and many more such discussions. But the vision of the ATCC is far-sighted: By 2010, they note, more than 100,000 area residents will earn less than it now costs to own or rent a home in the city, and the only way we can improve that situation – and forestall an otherwise inevitable human and infrastructure crisis – is by planning for it.

And in the broadest community sense, if we hope to create an urban landscape accommodating to a real human scale, and not structurally dependent on the automobile and all the burdensome social costs that dependency imposes – we

have to plan and build neighborhoods where all of us can live.

Who knows if it's possible, in this state, and time, and country? But if it's ever going to happen, it will be because of the progressive kind of activism embodied in the groups making up the ATCC.